

Chapter 14: Falling Dominoes

Two days of training under Aífe meant I was twice as sore when I woke up on Friday than I was the day before. Even the aches in my muscles had developed aches of their own, and it was a struggle and a half just to drag myself out of bed and down the stairs.

This was the price of my sisters' salvation.

“Regretting your choices yet?” Medea asked me as I half-stumbled into the kitchen.

“Ask me again tomorrow,” I grumbled.

Getting the dishes and utensils necessary to make breakfast became a Herculean task. My arms shook and my fingers were almost numb from the white-knuckled grip I had to keep just to make sure I didn't drop anything and make a mess. I had to carry the carton of eggs with both hands, just so I could keep ahold of it.

By the time I'd gotten everything I needed, I'd already spent three times as long on breakfast as I had the day before.

“Two days and you've already been reduced to hobbling around like an invalid,” she said, cruelly amused by my suffering. “I wonder how miserable you'll be by Sunday.”

I grunted, my patience already worn thin.

“Shut up and get over here so I can teach you to make Omurice,” I told her sourly.

Perhaps unwilling to chance that I might turn her away, she bit her tongue on whatever other barbed comment she'd been about to make and slowly came over to join me. It was a good thing I was teaching her, too, because it meant I could step back and give her instructions instead of having to do anything myself and risk spilling eggs and rice all over the countertop and the floor.

It didn't turn out half bad for her first try. It wasn't the greatest Omurice I'd ever had, but Omurice wasn't exactly the most gourmet of meals, so it didn't really say much that it turned out just “okay.” Oyakodon was harder — I'd probably test her on that next week, if she kept progressing at the rate she was.

Of course, it was only after breakfast was eaten and my morning cup of tea was had that I realized what an idiot I was, because I was an expert in medicinal magecraft and I could have just soothed my sore muscles myself.

Great going, Yukio. You spent how many years perfecting your knowledge of how to heal the human body, and still, you forgot to put it to use on yourself?

Medea, on the other hand, was amused. “You forgot you could do that, didn't you?”

“Shut up,” I told her grumpily. The tips of my ears were burning. “I'm not a morning person, okay?”

She chortled and hid her smile behind the rim of her cup, disguising her mirth by sipping at the tea I'd made for her. *Glad to know I can at least be a source of entertainment for you.*

It wasn't the way I wanted to be bringing down those impressive walls of hers, but if she was going to relax enough to laugh and tease me, however mean-spirited it was, I was more than willing to count that as a win. A minor win, but enough of one for me to count it.

I drained my cup of tea to its last drop and set the dishes aside to be washed later, then left Medea to go get ready for the rest of my day. As she had been the last two days, Aífe was waiting for me by the front door. She stepped aside to let me past and vanished, but I was under no illusions that she had left.

Right. My own personal shadow.

The morning air was no less chilly than it had been the day before, giving me ample reason to wrap myself in a jacket and scarf and pull on that pair of gloves again. I couldn't be sure it would last, though, so I was going to have to come up with some other way to hide my Command Spells. Some way that wasn't so obvious Rin would immediately realize what I was hiding.

For now, though, the gloves worked, and she was none the wiser when I walked up to her, her hands shoved into her own jacket as she shivered in the cold.

I opened my mouth to greet her.

"If you offer to share body heat again, I'm slapping you," she told me flatly.

I laughed and lifted one hand up as I pressed the other to my heart. "I would never!"

"Your memory is conveniently short, because you did just yesterday," she retorted.

"Some jokes just get staler the more times you use them," I told her. "That's why comedic timing is all about knowing when to make which joke for maximum effect."

She arched an eyebrow at me. "Right. Sure."

I offered her my arm. "Well. Shall we?"

Rin turned away without even giving it more than a glance. "How many times am I going to have to tell you? That stuff doesn't work here in Japan. I'm not walking to school arm in arm with you."

She started walking without me, and I fell into step next to her as we made our way towards Homurahara. "One day, I'll get you to accept," I swore to her.

She didn't even glance in my direction.

"Don't hold your breath."

If you knew what I do about what's to come, wouldn't you be just as desperate to cherish these moments? Wouldn't you cling to me for every second you could steal?

But I didn't ask her that. If everything went the way I planned for it to, then she would never even have to think about it.

For now, I could just be her annoying brother who had spent so long abroad that he didn't care for Japanese social norms anymore.

"So is Ryûdô-kun still wound tighter than a spring?" I asked her as we walked.

She snorted.

"Like you wouldn't believe," she said dryly. "He's still convinced that I'm plotting something nefarious and just waiting for the right moment."

"In other words, he sees right through you," I teased.

"It actually is kind of incredible," she agreed. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he had some sort of extrasensory ability that lets him see the truth of things... Or something like that."

"He has an unusual talent." I chuckled. "Maybe he inherited some kind of karma from living in that temple his whole life. Unless you have a better explanation, heiress of the Tohsaka lineage?"

"The maddening thing is that I don't," she said, "so I can't refute that suggestion, no matter how sure I am that it doesn't work like that."

Just wait until you come up against one of those "exceptions" to the rules that seem to exist solely to frustrate you, I thought. Shirou will probably have you tearing your hair out.

"Well, he didn't like me any better," I told her. "I moved ahead of his year, so our interactions were limited, but he was just as convinced of my deviancy as he is of yours."

"At least he would have had more reason to suspect you," she replied. "You didn't even bother to pretend to be a normal high school student, not any more than you had to in order to attend school. If I didn't know you better, I might have suspected you of using charm spells to bewitch my female classmates."

"All I did was be polite and respectful." I shrugged and shook my head helplessly. "It probably says more about our male peers than it does about me that something so simple apparently made so many of those girls fall for me."

I still wasn't sure she wasn't just pulling my leg about that. A handful of girls, sure, I could believe that. I'd been called charismatic before. But near enough to every single one? That just seemed frankly impossible.

The shrine thing and the school club dedicated to me, those were almost certainly made up to tease me. My beloved twin sister sure was cruel, wasn't she?

"It's not like I'm Diarmuid of the Radioactive Mole, after all."

"Diarmuid of the Radioactive Mole?" she echoed, bemused.

“The guy from the Fenian Cycle.” I tapped my cheek just underneath my left eye. “He has a ‘love spot’ that makes any woman who gazes upon it fall in love with him.”

“That at least would make some sense. If you had something like that, this obsession my classmates have with you could actually be explained.”

“As opposed to your male classmates’ obsession with *you*.”

She waved it off. “We’ve already been over that. I’m attractive and they’re teenage boys. It’s self-explanatory.”

“Humble, aren’t you?”

“Just self-aware,” she shot back.

We continued on in that vein the whole rest of the trip, sniping back and forth as we teased each other and fell into the rhythm we’d had six months ago, before I left for England. It was like we were a normal brother and sister.

All too soon, however, the front gate of Homurahara loomed. Mitsuzuri wasn’t waiting there today, either.

“Small mercies,” Rin said dryly when I pointed it out.

“Aren’t the two of you best friends?” I asked.

“I wonder.” She shook her head. “Anyway. I’m going to get to homeroom. I’ve given up on convincing you to save me the embarrassment, so I guess I’ll see you later on after school.”

“You’re not going to get rid of me that easily.” I smirked. “Tell Ryûdô I said ‘hi,’ would you?”

She snorted. “I will, just so I can see the look on his face.”

“You’re a terrible person, you know that?”

“I’m your sister, after all,” she agreed.

She turned away from me and went off towards the school entrance. I watched her go for a handful of seconds, then made my own turn and walked across the courtyard to the archery range so that I could check on Sakura. There was just one problem, as I found out when I got inside.

Sakura wasn’t there.

I double-checked, then triple-checked, looking up and down the line of students who were focused solely and completely upon their targets at the opposite end of the range, but there was no Sakura. No head of dark hair tied off to one side with a bright red ribbon.

When I took another look, I realized that Shinji wasn’t there, either.

Something cold wrapped its fingers around my stomach.

“Looking for someone, Yukio?”

Mitsuzuri approached from the side, having snuck up on me while I was distracted, and I scrambled to make sure my face was graced with a look of mild confusion when I turned to her.

“I just noticed that you seem to be down a few members this morning,” I said politely. “Is something wrong? I would hope they didn’t injure themselves or something.”

“You mean Sakura and Shinji?” Mitsuzuri asked. “Yeah, they called in sick today. Fujimura-sensei told me that they might be gone tomorrow, too, depending on how serious it winds up being.”

My heart thudded in my chest, so loud that I was sure she must have heard it, but she gave no indication that she did. Somehow, it seemed I also managed to keep my face from showing any reaction either.

“You don’t say...”

My head felt light, and I deliberately forced myself to take deep, slow breaths to stay as calm as I could.

Does that mean what I think it means? Aífe asked me suddenly.

I inspected the line again to hide my expression from Mitsuzuri. *I think it just might.*

Which was distressing. It was possible that the two of them really were out sick and there wasn't something more nefarious at work, but the more likely explanation...

“Worried?” Mitsuzuri asked slyly, smirking. “You know, you’ve been coming here an awful lot since you got back. Nearly every day, in fact. Could it be, does Sakura-chan have a secret admirer?”

A grimace pulled at my mouth. “No.” God, no. “Nothing so scandalous.”

Not for me personally, anyway. For our family, however, that was another story.

“So there *is* something,” she crowed.

“Not like you’re thinking,” I told her coolly. “It’s complicated, and it’s really not my dirty laundry to air.”

Technically, it was my father’s, but Mitsuzuri would come to some other conclusion and I wouldn’t need to do anything else to lead her off on the wrong track.

“In any case, I’m not sure Sakura-san would appreciate me talking about it either,” I went on, “so please forget the subject was ever broached.”

Mitsuzuri’s grin soured and she clicked her tongue. “That bad, huh? Fine, I can take a hint. I’ll let sleeping dogs lie in this case.”

“Thank you.”

“Was that all you were here for, then?” She grinned again. “Because I’m still available and single if you’re looking for —”

“Thank you, but I’m not interested,” I cut across her. “Besides, I think it better for both our sakes if you didn’t finish that offer of yours. If the wrong people were to hear it, then the both of us would wind up in quite the bit of hot water.”

I gave her a short, polite nod. “Thanks for your time, Mitsuzuri.”

Spinning on my heel, I turned around and made to leave. There was a conversation that Aife and I were going to need to have.

“Why do you think I asked?” Mitsuzuri called at my back. “Whenever you walk to school together, your sister runs right to homeroom! That’s how I know it was safe!”

I stopped at the door and turned to look at her over my shoulder. “Whoever said I was talking about Rin?”

She blinked, nonplussed, and I took that as my moment to beat a hasty retreat, while she was too stunned to react.

If she and my sister were so insistent about teasing me over my apparent popularity with their peers, then it was their own fault if they didn’t expect me to ever throw it back in their faces.

My thoughts remained troubled as I left the school behind, and I made a beeline again for the house I had used the day before to have a similarly private conversation — except, no, this wasn’t a conversation I needed to keep from Medea, so halfway there, I turned back around and headed for the mansion I was currently staying at.

Under different circumstances... Well, no, I was always going to be suspicious of Sakura being home “sick,” no matter what. It wasn’t necessarily impossible for either Sakura or Shinji to actually catch a cold or something, but frankly, the far more likely possibility was something to do with magecraft. “Training,” as Zouken liked to call it. “Torture,” as any reasonable human being would call it.

When they were staying home together, it almost certainly meant that Shinji was... “supplying” Sakura with the magical energy she needed to help fuel Zouken’s Crest Worms. When she stayed home alone, she was undoubtedly being forced back down into that vile pit, made to suffer yet more for the sake of that twisted old man’s dream of immortality.

But none of those times before also happened to coincide with the perfect window for the summoning of what should have been Medusa as a Rider Servant. Without that slot open, however, well, the Matou were guaranteed a place in the Grail War, and I would have thought that Zouken would take that chance to stick his nose into things, giving us Hassan of the Cursed Arm to worry about.

And he was still pushing Sakura into the role of Master instead.

What that meant... I couldn't be sure. I had a few guesses, but nothing concrete. My knowledge of things to come made me better equipped to predict the others and their actions, not infallible or omniscient.

As the mansion came into view up the road, I reached for the bond connecting me to my other Servant, and down that thread, I pushed the thoughts, *Caster, there's been a development. Please put down whatever you're working on as soon as you're able.*

There was a long moment, and at first, I wasn't actually expecting her to reply. Our truce over breakfast and cooking didn't necessarily apply to the rest of our interactions, especially in regards to the Grail War.

Then, with an air of longsuffering, *Very well.*

Maybe she was starting to warm up to me after all...was what I wanted to believe, but it was more likely that she was just calming down after adjusting to everything I'd dropped into her lap two days ago. Expecting anything more than that was just pure fantasy. Little more than wishful thinking.

She was waiting for us near the front door, arms crossed over her chest, her brow furrowed, and her lips pressed tight.

"What's this emergency about that you pulled me away from working on *your* project?" she asked.

"If it hasn't occurred already," I told her shortly, "Assassin will be summoned tonight."

Her eyebrows rose and her mouth opened, but before she could ask for more details, I shook my head and gestured further into the house. "Living room."

I could go for a cup of tea, too, I didn't say. Medea wouldn't have appreciated it, and just then, it would have come out much more sour and petty than an actual, honest request.

Aífe shimmered into existence behind me as we made our way towards the living room and took our seats again. Funnily enough, they were the exact same seats we'd taken just a few nights ago when we first discussed the events to come.

"Matou Sakura and Matou Shinji were both absent from school today," I announced as a form of preamble.

"So?" Medea asked.

"Matou *Zouken*," Aífe reminded her, and Medea's eyes widened a little.

"Ah."

"I made a bad assumption," I admitted plainly. "I thought Zouken would choose to insert himself once he realized the Rider slot had already been taken, but he's chosen instead to act via his originally intended proxies."

"Hence why you said this Shinji was a provisional Master," Medea said slowly.

A sigh hissed out of my nostrils. I was hoping to keep Sakura firmly out of everyone's crosshairs for the duration, but there wasn't anything for it now, was there?

"Yes and no," I told her. "Matou Shinji has no talent as a magus. He doesn't even have magic circuits. Under ordinary circumstances, he doesn't have any ability to be a Master at all. None."

Aífe leaned forward. "Then how..."

"If a Servant was to be ordered to treat another as their Master via a Command Spell," Medea murmured, "then even someone who isn't a proper Master could be considered one, couldn't he?"

"Yes." I couldn't stop my hand from fidgeting, rapping my fingers against the armrest. A part of me wanted to get up and pace, but I forced myself to stay seated and composed. "It's called the Book of the False Attendant. I don't know who came up with it, but Zouken can form a book using his worm familiars and one of the real Master's Command Spells."

"Sakura," Medea realized. "The real Master is Matou Sakura. And you knew she — of *course* you knew!"

She stood from her chair, snarling, splotches of red blooming on her cheeks in her anger.

"You're still keeping secrets!" she accused me furiously. "You're still holding — you said you would tell us everything, and you *lied!*"

"Of *course* I'm still keeping secrets," I retorted, trying my best to keep my voice as calm and level as I could. I wasn't sure how well I succeeded. "Of course I haven't told you absolutely everything I know."

She sneered, teeth bared. "So you're going to go back on it, just like that? After you gave that speech and promised to share what we needed to know —"

"Caster, *I don't trust you.*"

Medea recoiled as though she'd been slapped.

"I *want* to," I went on, staring right into those blue eyes. Blue like the sky on a clear day. I hoped she could see how much I meant it. "But you haven't given me much reason to. It goes both ways — you're not willing to trust me, so I can't trust you. Neither of us has *earned* it from the other, have we?"

She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, gnawing on it between her front teeth. I didn't have any idea whether that was because she agreed and didn't want to admit it, or if she was literally biting back some sort of acidic comment. Right then, it didn't matter much.

I could admit that I hadn't made the best first impression. That I hadn't given her any reason to put her faith in me. All things considered, it couldn't be helped.

But I had never lied about how much I wanted to help her be more than just the Witch of Betrayal.

“There *are* things that I haven’t told you yet,” I kept going. “Things I can’t *trust* you with yet. If Zouken had chosen to be a Master himself, Sakura would never have been important to our plans at all. But because he hasn’t, Sakura has to factor into things now, and I’m telling you what’s relevant for that.”

“You better than most should understand the issue of trust, *Medea*,” Aífe added.

Medea recoiled again. “How — ?!”

“You all but broadcasted it,” Aífe told her. “A female Caster of remarkable talent with incredible magic who has more trust issues than all of Ireland has *geasa*? There aren’t so many of those that it was particularly hard to puzzle out. The other option was Morgan le Fay.”

She cocked one eyebrow at Medea, glancing her up and down. “You’re looking pretty dry for a lake fairy.”

“And you?” Medea sneered. “You haven’t exactly been subtle about your own identity, *Queen Aífe*. You really ought to learn to better hide that animosity you have for your erstwhile lover. With someone less scrupulous, it might get you in trouble.”

Aífe grinned, a thing of teeth and edges, unperturbed. “Glad we’re all on the same page, now. It means we can drop all of the subterfuge and hiding.”

“Because we’re all on the same team,” I said forcefully, trying to drag the conversation back on track. “We don’t have to agree about everything, but we can all at least say that the end of the world is a bad thing, right?”

For a long moment, they glared at each other and ignored me. The air was thick with the tension of their mutual animosity.

“Right?”

But finally, they backed down from what could very easily have devolved into an actual fight — a fight I was sure Medea knew she wouldn’t win, because her only option was Rulebreaker, and that would cause far more problems than it would solve.

“So,” Medea began, and the heat hadn’t completely left her voice yet, “what does this change for us?”

Somehow, I held back a relieved sigh.

“For now? Nothing important,” I said. “Sakura has no intention of involving herself, so she’ll be happy to let Shinji take Assassin’s contract using that Book. Things might change if something happens to convince Zouken he should be more insistent about her participation, but he won’t do that unless he’s convinced he can break her.”

“Break her?” Aífe burst out, turning back to me. “You mean she’s put up with that for ten years and she’s still holding on?”

“Put up with *what*?” Medea demanded.

“Tenuously,” I answered Aífe. “She taught herself to shut off the world and guard her heart, and that’s why she’s managed to hold on.” Dissociation, I didn’t call it. That was specialized knowledge that wouldn’t mean anything to them. “Zouken doesn’t know how to do anything about it, so he’s mostly given up on her as anything other than a broodmare for future Matou generations.”

More people for him to torment, in other words. More Uncle Kariyas and Matou Byakuyas, who either left entirely until he manipulated them back or fell into a drunken depression.

To Medea, I said, “The Matou family magecraft is inherited through the comingling of the flesh of the prospective heir with Zouken’s worm familiars — Crest Worms, in other words. The least invasive method is through ingestion.”

It was a little easier, saying it now. Maybe finally having a chance to vent with Aífe had helped me calm some of the anger that had been bottling up for the last ten years.

Medea recoiled. “*Least* invasive?”

“Whatever you’re imagining is probably correct,” Aífe told her, disgusted. “And yes, the conclusion that leads to is also correct. She was *six* when he started ‘training’ her.”

The chair’s armrests creaked under Medea’s grip. Slowly, deliberately, she forced herself to relax, so that when she spoke again, it was measured and even. “I see.”

See, I thought, you do have a heart buried underneath all that bitterness. Some part of you sees that injustice and wants to correct it.

She could, too, be a hero, if she wanted. If she was willing to *try*. Her legend was over and done, and it had no more say over who she could be here and now than she let it.

“The trouble this presents us now is that we won’t know who the Assassin is going to be,” I said, steering the conversation back on track again. “Unfortunately, it’s almost certainly not going to be Cursed Arm Hassan, and of the remaining seventeen, I only know of two more. One is an almost certain no, because it was the Assassin Kirei summoned in the last War, and the other is unlikely but recognizable enough I’ll know her on sight. The rest are complete unknowns.”

Medea turned narrowed eyes on me. “Don’t you care about Sakura’s suffering at all?”

If she knew I was Sakura’s brother, would she even ask me such a thing? The answer should have been obvious.

For now, however, that was still a card I was going to keep close to my chest.

“Oh, I do.” I smiled, one of Rin’s patented smiles, too bright and too cheery to ever be real. “I’ve had ten years to stew on it. Ten years to know exactly what Zouken was doing to...her.” I almost called Sakura my sister. “Medea, I don’t just care. I’m *furios*.”

My smile grew a little brighter, a little more genuine. “And you know what we’re going to do to him? Do you know how we’re going to punish Matou Zouken? How we’re going to avenge Sakura’s suffering?”

I leaned forward, stared her straight in the eyes, and with relish, I said, “When the War is in full swing and he’s as close as he can ever get to his wish, we’re going to invade his sanctuary, burn his whole world down...and kill the man who wants to live forever.”

Slowly, a cruel, evil smile crept over Medea’s face. “Oh my,” she purred. “Master, I think this is the first thing you and I agree on completely.”